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ABSTRACT

The National Association of School Psychologists recognizes that students who are of a minority sexual orientation, or are perceived to be, are at risk for a number of dangerous and destructive behaviors as well as harassment, discrimination, and low self-esteem. A successful program to address these issues educates both those who discriminate and those who are discriminated against because of sexual orientation. This education can occur on a number of levels: intervention with individual students, schoolwide inservice training, and the modeling of attitudes and behaviors by school psychologists with all students and staff. Any program designed to address the needs of sexual minority youth should also include efforts to educate parents and the community through involvement with other organizations committed to equal opportunity for education and mental health services for all youth. Schools can only be truly safe when every student, regardless of sexual orientation, is assured of access to an education without fear of harassment or violence. (Contains 18 references.) (MKA)

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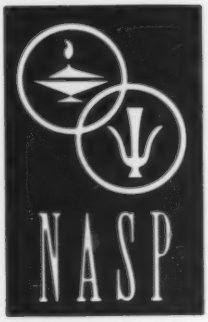

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Position Statement

Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth

Youth who become aware of a minority sexual orientation within themselves during childhood or adolescence are at greater risk for a number of dangerous or harmful situations or activities. The most prominent risks include suicide, physical and verbal harassment, exposure to the HIV virus, and substance abuse. In addition, these youth are often rejected, emotionally and physically, by their families and may become homeless as a result of the disclosure of their sexual orientation. Society's attitudes and behaviors toward these youth render them invisible. As a result, this group suffers from a lack of resources to deal with the problems caused by the internalized sense of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth who also have disabilities or are members of other minority groups have additional barriers to receiving appropriate education and mental health care within the school system and society as a whole.

The National Association of School Psychologists supports equal access to education and mental health services for sexual minority youth within public and private schools. This can be accomplished through: 1) education of students and staff, 2) direct counseling with students who are experiencing difficulties within themselves or with others due to actual or perceived minority sexual orientation, 3) advocacy for such youth within the school and the community settings, 4) support of research on evaluations of interventions and programs designed to address the needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in schools, and 5) support of programs for HIV prevention directed at gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth.

Violence and intimidation directed at sexual minority youth, whether aimed at an individual through direct harassment or at the entire group through antigay statements or biases, violate the right of these students to receive equal educational opportunities. NASP believes that school psychologists are ethically obligated to ensure that these students have an equal opportunity for the development of their personal identity in an environment free from discrimination, harassment, violence, and abuse. To achieve this goal, efforts must be made through education and advocacy for these youth to reduce discrimination and harassment against sexual minority youth by both students and staff.

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Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth

Schools must maintain campuses that are safe and conducive to learning for all students. NASP believes that efforts to create safe schools for sexual minority youth should include but not limited to education of all students and staff, direct intervention with victims and perpetrators of harassment and discrimination of those at risk, and promoting societal and familial attitudes and behaviors that affirm the dignity and rights of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth.

Education of students and staff. Because many gay, lesbian, and bisexual students choose not to reveal their sexual orientation for fear of harassment, other students and staff are often not aware of their presence. Staff and students who are aware and supportive may fear openly speaking out for sexual minority youth because of the possibility of being discriminated against themselves. Even among those who are aware of the existence of sexual minority youth in their school, many maintain misconceptions regarding these youth and may be unsure how to address their needs. NASP supports educating students and staff regarding the existence and needs of sexual minority youth through inservice training on the risks experienced by these youth, research relevant to these youth, and appropriate ways of addressing harassment and discrimination directed toward any student. In addition, issues pertaining to sexual orientation can be infused in the curriculum, such as presenting theories regarding the development of sexual orientation in a science class, reading works of famous gay, lesbian, or bisexual authors in a literature class, or discussing the gay rights movement in historical context with other civil rights movements in a social studies class. Sexual minority youth must also be educated to reduce unsafe behavior such as substance abuse and exposure to HIV. In addition, educating these youth can reduce the isolation they often feel as a result of perceiving themselves as invisible or as misunderstood.

Direct intervention with victims and perpetrators of harassment and discrimination. As with any instance of school violence, harassment and discrimination against sexual minority youth should be addressed both through applying consequences and educating the perpetrator and by supporting and protecting the victim. Both goals can be achieved through nonjudgmental counseling for students who have been victims of such harassment or who are questioning their sexual orientation and may become targets of harassment in the future by disclosing their status as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Counseling and education should also be provided to the perpetrator to help prevent future episodes of harassment. Because school staff may, knowingly or unknowingly, discriminate against sexual minority youth, NASP believes that education and support for sexual minority youth must occur at all levels of schooling. This education should include students, teachers, support staff, and administrators and should stress that discrimination and harassment must be addressed regardless of the status of the perpetrator.

Promoting societal and familial attitudes and behaviors that affirm the dignity and rights within educational environments of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. By educating students and staff, school psychologists can help change negative or indifferent attitudes toward sexual minority youth. However, a much more powerful agent of change may be the example of the school psychologist who refuses to allow slurs or discrimination to occur and who is willing to provide services to all students regardless of sexual orientation or other minority status. Within their own schools and in society as a whole, school psychologists can promote attitudes that affirm the dignity and rights of sexual minority youth by removing biases from their own practice . They can also point out the actions or statements of other school staff who discriminate or neglect the needs of sexual minority youth and attempt to address these issues in a fair way. In particular, school policies should mandate fair treatment of all students and equal access to educational and mental health services within the schools. School psychologists can provide expert opinions and research-based information to assure that such policies are in place and enforced. Finally, school psychologists can encourage local, state, and national organizations to disseminate information to parents and other groups that need to be aware of the issues related to gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in the schools.

Role of the School Psychologist

Because they work directly with students as well as staff and administrators, school psychologists are uniquely positioned to affect policies and practices within the schools. They can also teach by example. School psychologists can explicitly inform students that they are available to all students regardless of sexual orientation. In counseling sessions, they can be mindful that be not every student is heterosexual and that sexual minority status can affect self-esteem and peer relationships. School psychologists can address issues of sexual orientation in inservice sessions as well. In presenting material on sexual harassment or discrimination, for example, they can take care to include examples and information involving sexual minority youth. School psychologists are also in a position to educate students on a number of issues related to high risk behaviors that are especially frequent among gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, targeting both the school population in general and sexual minority youth in particular.

Summary

NASP recognizes that students who are of a minority sexual orientation, or are perceived to be, are at risk of a number of dangerous and destructive behaviors as well as harassment, discrimination, and low self-esteem. A successful program to address these issues educates both those who discriminate and those who are discriminated against because of sexual orientation. This education can occur on a number of levels: intervention with individual students, schoolwide inservice training, and modeling behaviors attitudes and behaviors by school

psychologists in daily interactions with all students and staff. Any program designed to address the needs of sexual minority youth should also include efforts to educate parents and the community through involvement with other organizations committed to equal opportunity for education and mental health services for all youth. Schools can only be truly safe when every student, regardless of sexual orientation, is assured of access to an education without fear of harassment or violence.

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